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Transforming the rhetoric: making images as practice led research

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Transforming the Rhetoric:
Making Images as Practice-Led Research

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Introduction

Beyond the scope of the 2007 exhibition, *Tactics against Fear – Creativity as Catharsis*, at the FCA Long Gallery, University of Wollongong, I will propose that there are three important hypotheses underlying these artistic practices which are crucial to the interaction with the public domain: 1. photography as method of social enquiry; 2. the creation of the image into a symbol drawing on archives of recent public memory within a broader cultural setting. Meaning in these photographic/digital documentations or presentations is not self-evident – images, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001:290) assert 'do not embody truth, but always rely on context and interpretation for their meanings.' The third proposes that thinking calls for images in order to transform the wider rhetoric.

I will discuss these hypotheses through the interventions of Juilee Pryor, painter and photographer, and media artist Brogan Bunt to demonstrate how digital imagery and photographic explorations have been employed as research methods to unpeel layers of visuality and to uncover the underlying forces of documentary and narrative.

Photography As Method Of Enquiry

I introduce Pryor and Bunt's work here in the context of documentary and narrative to illustrate two quite distinct artistic approaches to the role of photography in devising rhetoric in visual culture, one embedded in photographic imagery, the other in software art (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1

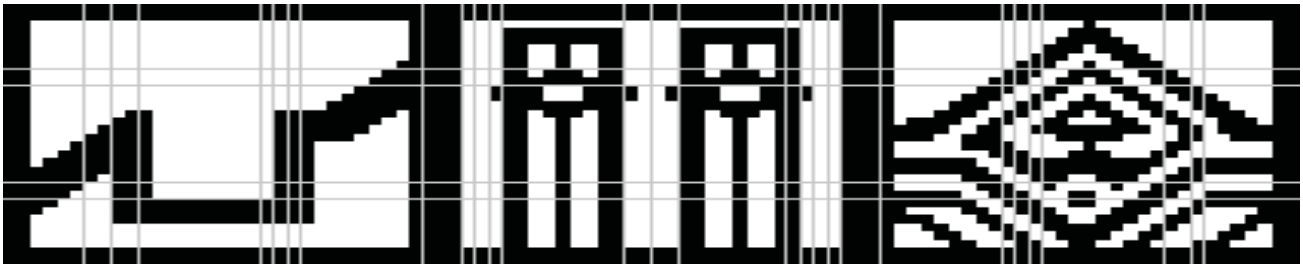


Figure 2

Despite the common perception that photographic images have surpassed painterly images in their verisimilitude in recording reality, photographic images have been manipulated ever since the invention of the medium. For example, digital technologies have weakened any claims of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ in journalistic photography; in deed lines between fact and fiction have been blurred (Leslie cited in Banks 2001:64). In effect this truthfulness to reality never really existed, as Martin Jay (1995:344-5) argues; the philosophical idea of visual primacy, underpinned by a saturation of images in daily life procured by the camera and other ocular devices, has become in fact the object of critical discourse early on in the history of photography. However, if we consider reality as subjective reality, then the verisimilitude of reality in photography or other imagery does not necessarily relate to the mimetic representation of visible object.

Figure 3

Juilee Pryor's work does not concern itself with mimetic representation – she rather distils an emotional or even spiritual essence - subjacent of what appears to be real scenes of real events at first glance (see Figure 3). The abstraction in her imagery evokes subliminal qualities of the medium itself and elevates the image into a spiritual realm of catharsis. Her black and white digital prints *After the Flood* 2007 are a response to the events of 11 September 2001 and the resulting deaths and devastation on the one side. On the other side, Pryor questions the propaganda used in mobilising for a war in Iraq under false pretence:

> When the World Trade Centre was destroyed in New York on September 11 2001, I felt devastation for all the victims of this atrocity. This included the terrorists themselves as well as the families of the dead and injured

> and of the perpetrators. When America used this atrocity as a reason to attack Iraq I was very disturbed by the transposition of lines of blame to a country that had no direct link [to] this attack on the USA.
> In the opening days of the American invasion of Iraq, there was heavy collateral damage brought about by the "shock and awe" tactics used by the attacking forces. One of the most profound and devastating early losses was the sacking and looting of the Museum of Bagdad. I felt that the decimation of this institution and the theft and loss of its collections should be listed as a war crime in itself as well as a crime against all humanity. (Pryor 2007:12)

Pryor's work included twelve digital prints and an installation of a corroded still-camera and rolls of film. Her representation of an imagined reality viewed from the future directly engages with the idea of visuality as constructing meaning for the viewer of a particular background. It also explores the notion of history and archaeology in its significance to understand not only the past but the present:

> As an artist I need to cross through the barrage of propaganda emanating from all the different countries involved in the production and export of cultures of terror to the rest of the world. In this new series of work entitled "After the Flood...." I am using the future in order to comment on events from the present and recent past.
> If documentary evidence of the major events of the present were located for perpetuity in a museum or institution which is subsequently destroyed then what remains within the destruction is all that is left for future historians to work with in order to make sense of the turbulent times of the long distant past.
> These images could be seen as random surviving documentation from a war in the present that historians in the very distant future are trying to reassemble into some semblance of coherence in order to make some sense of their own present times. (Pryor 2007:12)

On the surface, Pryor's work brings to mind methodologies from the disciplines of archaeology, visual anthropology and history. In fact, her work alludes to forensic evidencing similar to the German and French artists working in the field of *Spurensicherung* in the 1970s (Metken 1996:9-10).[1] Pryor combines analogue pre-production and manipulated digital print outs in A3 format to mimic authentic documents of a past historical event or even artefacts of historical significance from the future.

However, there is clearly another level in her work which anchors her profoundly in what Carol Gray (cited in Haseman 2007:147) defined as research-led practice – which means that 'the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly

methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners.' Pryor considers modes of viewing in her method, by manipulating twenty year old negatives digitally and inserting them in frayed and weathered analogue negative frames set; throwing the viewer back into a sense of melancholy:

> By faking lost documentation from the future I am giving myself the freedom to cultivate a different viewpoint of the past and draw conclusions and inferences of the present that serve as a personal catharsis against terror. (Pryor 2007:12)

Figure 4

She achieves this by personal, atmospheric lights and tones set in sepia, where dark shades and flashes of light flow seamlessly – and not unlike a watercolour painting – into one another (see Figure 4). This is reminiscent of her photographic work in Antarctica in recent years, tracing the tragedy of early explorers, and bears the hallmark of her earlier years as a painter. Her work is about imagining the memory of a traumatic event; at the same time, her landscapes are witness to fleeting moments of atmospheric stress and the sublime.

Pryor uses photography as a method of enquiry; the use of the images and installation of the corroded camera with rolls of film bring a physical immediacy to the work which emulates the role of the artefact or document that supplies evidence or supports information that is highly subjective. This opens up to ways of thinking about processes of memory in the public domain that are fought out in the field of visual culture.

Transforming Images Into Icons

Contrasting Pryor's more painterly method, Brogan Bunt's method of enquiry is anchored in media arts – using cognitive emotion that reflects the internet age. Bunt's work brings an understanding of mass communication and its impact on visual culture through his practice; employing critical software art allows him to critically engage with the processes of memory through visuality as a part of the hegemonic 'imagining' of society. He addresses the second hypothesis: certain images - through constant representation and their surrounding discourse - transform into cultural icons. This means that certain images of political purport in the public domain become invested with meaning of symbolic value acquired through specific or general contextualisation. Brogan Bunt responds in his work to these symbols and signs of hegemonic visual narratives of global events that obliterate other, possibly equally significant aspects from visual culture and therefore prevent their archiving in memory.

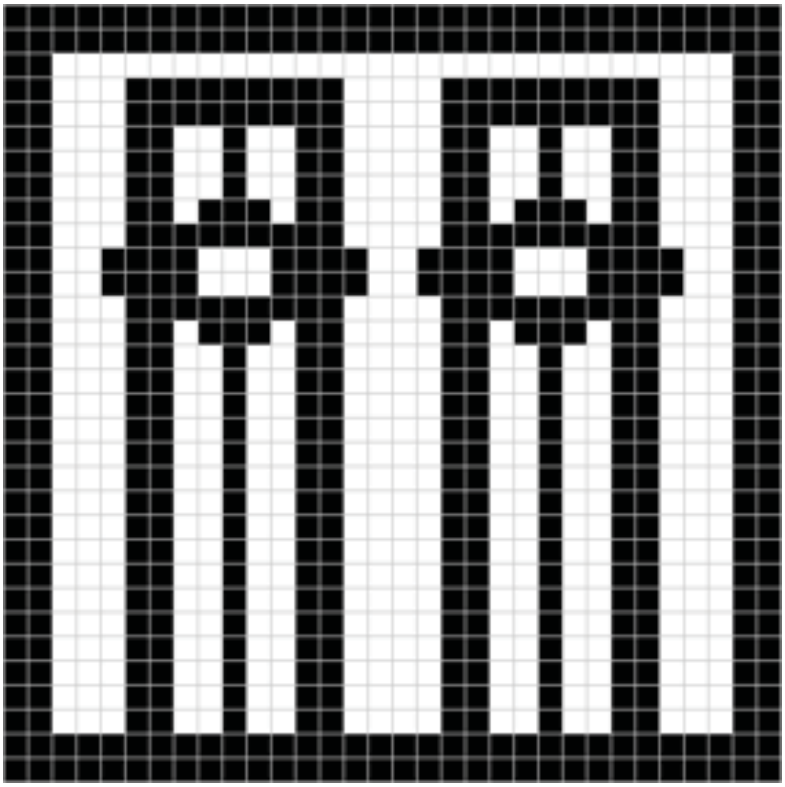


Figure 5

Bunt uses tools of media art to explore what photographic or documentary narratives do not tell us. He uses these tools of software programming to create alternative texts and visuals to lay bare things the iconic images of global events do not reveal (see Figure 5). His approach to the same subject matter is twofold: in the work 'War on Terror' five framed images of icons were hung on the wall, accompanied by text panels. Here, the interaction between audience and artwork is conventional. In 'Iconistory"' the link to his computer application 'Iconistory' at http://mediaarts.uow.edu.au/Iconistory/ invites the viewer to creatively engage in the construction of meaning by creating black and white icons to relate to stories; 'the specific aim is to represent historical events in impossibly simplified and miniature terms.'[2] This follows on his investigations of morphing aesthetic practices with the logical abstraction and instrumental engineering of programming software, applying the knowledge of public photographic images and transforming them into new icons.

The role of the artist is to show what is visible and what is not. We find that images transform in certain cases through constant repetition from images (imago) to symbol

(representation by association) that may fulfil iconic properties proposed in dominant textual and written narratives. In that sense, images of the crashing twin towers in New York for example - through constant representation in the media - are symbolic of what Graham Coultier-Smith and Maurice Owen (2005) referred to as 'age of terrorism' since 2001.

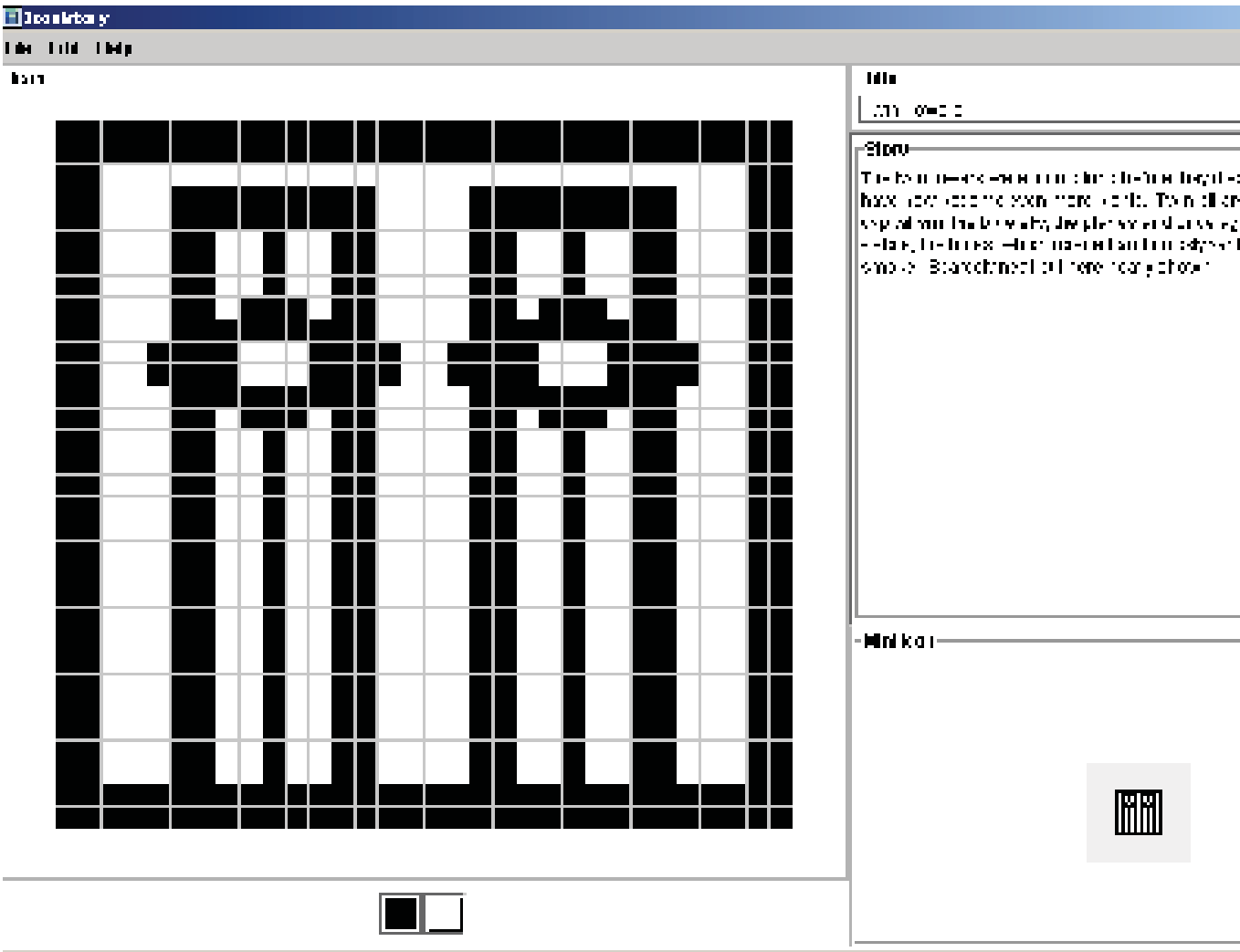
Brogan Bunt looks in his work *War on Terror* five framed prints depicting small icons of the *Twin Towers* of the World Trade Centre in New York, the weapons of mass destruction, the *Bamiyan Buddhas* and Bin Laden's caves of *Tora Bora* in Afghanistan, at the holes and absences in visual rhetoric, as juxtaposition to iconic images as representation of the "war on terror" (see Figure 2):

> How can the current "war on terror" be visually and conceptually represented? Apart from the iconic images - explosions, beards and chadors, beheadings, wrecked towns, caskets, etc. - there are other ones that threaten to undermine the visible and to pass away from it. Instead of solid objects and bright events there are holes and absences. These visible absences often run alongside the more obvious images, so that there is at once the blasting of the Bamiyan buddhas and the scene of the remaining empty alcoves. There is the fiery scene of the destruction of the twin towers and then there is the new, somewhat reduced, New York skyline. There is the face of Osama Bin Laden and then the caves of Tora Bora where he disappeared. In some cases the absence is even more pronounced. The weapons of mass destruction that justified the invasion of Iraq appear as nothing now but holes in the ground - non-icons that represent through a negation of substantive visible evidence an over-riding regime of panic, lies and massive cultural fear. (Bunt 2007:7)

Bunt addresses at least two issues here - the usual absence of viewer agency in the creative process of creating images into symbols and the power of iconic imagery in constructing hegemonic narratives. The work plays on the notion of relational dimensions: he proposes there are signs of events that need to be recovered. The tiny images, as opposed to their 'blown up' references, are framed in conventional wooden frames which hint on the iconic role of art in western culture to create value. They also insist on paying closer attention to detail of the context to those references by rendering 'these representative empty spaces as literal icons'

> The standard Windows icon is a 32 x 32 grid of black and white pixels. These simple arrows, hourglasses, pointing fingers and eyes represent an effort at minimal, purified clarity. What would it mean to represent the "war

on terror" in these terms? In some senses it is already represented in these terms, but my interest is in emphasising the non-spaces that lie at the heart of this very real and yet strangely imaginary space of conflict. (Bunt 2007:7)



Figurre 6

At the same time, the perhaps more popular medium of computer application 'Iconistory"'provides a visual thinking tool for the viewer to decode the rapidly changing meaning of images in the public realm and – simultaneously– to code a new sign system that is subjective and disruptive to rhetorical, iconic narrative (see Figure 6).

Thinking Calls For Images: Transforming The Rhetoric

In our highly visualised environment, images not only communicate ideas or interests to a wider audience, they authenticate and document; but as the works by Bunt and Pryor suggest, they are also instrumental in thinking processes that transform a rhetoric of fear. In analysing images, we find that the complexity of visual language in culture and its interrelationship with text-based discourse can tell us even more about our society. At the same time, we use images to creatively engage with and disrupt dominant narratives. Four decades ago, Rudolf Arnheim (1969:254) poignantly argued that '[t]hinking calls for images, and images contain thought. Therefore, the visual arts are a home ground of visual thinking' – and this lies at the heart of the projects of practice-led research, as I have demonstrated through the works of Pryor and Bunt.

Both artists employ specific processes of imaging as a way of visual thinking. The theoretical framework for a visual researcher, a scholar who is aware of the triangulation of production, representation and reception of the visual material as a dynamic force in visual discourse, allows the artworks to engage the viewer to partake in the decoding of symbols and signs that affect our experience of daily life.
Documentary and discovery based practice has become more eminent in the rising focus of anthropological and artistic research; in visual anthropology we find the focus on culture as a manifestation of the interaction between visible symbols rooted in ceremonial, ritual and artistic practice, therefore the employment of audiovisual technologies help to archive, analyse and present those cultural manifestations. The photograph or ethnographic film becomes artefact and object of reflexive consideration. In visual arts imagery has often been used to form an alternative language to the written word, representing or alluding to a public rhetoric with the intention to foster discourse or debate. In the process, these images become documents around which narratives evolve. In that sense, we can say the importance of the photo document in professional practice is the delight in knowing. Yet what constitutes this knowing?

This questioning of representational truth is one reason why visual anthropologists for example use photographic imagery often in a reflexive way (Ruby 1996:1345). However, the act of image creation, such as photography, becomes a visually and socially embedded practice not only for the anthropologist – also for the visual artists the

significance of verisimilitude of the image content moves to the background; important is how certain images affect the viewer and what memory they trigger.

Similarly, the visual artist can use visual recording technology to reflect on events that influence the way we see ourselves within the world. Thus, what images do is they construct a social reality; therefore the practitioner-researcher captures subtleties and nuances through the creative processes familiar to them' (Haseman 2007:147) - the artistic works chosen here for discussion employ the photographic/ digital medium as documentary practice in a narrow and broader sense; they explore these means as an alternative path to the narratives offered in mass media and as tool of personal and public memory.

Conclusion

The works I discussed from this exhibition were created on the premise that they are creatively responding to a visual rhetoric which can have cathartic properties for the individual as well as the body politic by learning and internalising global events. They also responded to the question of how can we, as scholars, creatively connect with issues that affect society? Following on my opening statement that photography as documentary practice plays an elementary role in visual culture we find that participating in this visual language can facilitate exchange of ideas between the practitioner and the public. Photography as a means to query dissects and interrogates dominant narratives of truth and thereby contrasting the historical notion of photography as documentary evidence. Pryor and Bunt's works communicate ideas which extend representational knowledge, returning agency and responsibility to the viewer. The examples I discussed here show that intervention between the researching artist and the public domain can disrupt a rethoric of fear by critically exploring notions of documentary and narratives that have determined the climate after the events of 9/11 in 2001, through their ability to transform the rhetoric of fear into a different kind of knowing.

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“Iconistory” (2007) http://mediaarts.uow.edu.au/Iconistory/

Figure 1 – Juilee Pryor. From the series *After the Flood* print no. 8, 2007. Digital Print. Dimensions A3. © Copyright: Juilee Pryor.

Figure 2 – Brogan Bunt. *Iconistory*. 2007. Ink on Paper. Dimensions unknown. © Copyright: Brogan Bunt.

Figure 3 – Juilee Pryor. From the series After the Flood print no.10, 2007. Digital Print. Dimensions A3. © Copyright: Juilee Pryor.

Figure 4 – Juilee Pryor. From the series After the Flood print no.2, 2007. Digital Print. Dimensions A3. © Copyright: Juilee Pryor.

Figure 5 - Brogan Bunt. Twin Towers. 2007. Ink on paper. Dimensions unknown. © Copyright: Brogan Bunt.

Figure 6 - Brogan Bunt. "Iconistory" Twin Towers 2007. Computer application. "Iconistory" (2007) http://mediaarts.uow.edu.au/Iconistory/

Notes

[1] Among the artists were Christian Boltanski, Jean Le Gac, Nikolaus Lang, Jean-Marie Bertholin, Claudio Costa, Jochen Gerz, Paul-Armand Gette, Anna Oppermann, Anne und Patrick Poirier, Charles Simmonds and Dorothee von Windheim.

[2] "Iconistory" at http://mediaarts.uow.edu.au/Iconistory/